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Some Students Observed

A student who had decided to go to an art college was entering a maelstrom.

Charles Madge and Barbara Weinberger in *Art Students Observed*[1]

In this chapter, we look at the work of three Leeds Fine Art students who took things further than might be expected. The three, Simon English, David Whatley and Gavin Lockhart, all arrived in 1970 and graduated in 1973. The work they produced in these three years might be described as sculpture; there were objects made and worked on. It is, however, the fact that the work seems to go beyond sculpture that makes it stand out and deserve greater attention.

There is another reason: as we know, by the end of the 1960s, the whole notion of art as object was being regularly interrogated, most visibly in Conceptual Art and in Minimalism which, as the latter term implies, treated the object in a minimal fashion. The most *avant-garde* artists were dispensing with the art object altogether, replacing it with either text or action.[2] So to come up with a viable alternative — one that was not retrogressive and one that was object–based but posited something new and vital — was a tough call.

The students who took this challenge on were aware of the context in which they worked and "I'm conceptualising" was ironically used as an excuse for lack of productivity, as was the modernist maxim, "Less means more." In fact, the imperative

to demonstrate originality tended to rule out blatantly conceptual pieces, as these were part of a recognised style and this most probably meant that it was over; the moment having been absorbed into the art historical narrative. So given these obstacles, what was a student to do to make his or her mark in the few short years available? One strategy was to do something that seemed impossible to accomplish. To make a sculpture as big as an island or even as big as a continent might be one such task. This was an idea Simon English took on while still a student at Leeds and managed to make real.

Simon English

Simon English arrived at Leeds bringing his ongoing artwork with him, and when he left, he was still working on his most ambitious project which involved all five continents of the planet Earth. After gaining a first class degree, he continued with his Land Art, but without the support he had at Leeds, it has been a difficult struggle.[i] When I interview him in June 2013, he is based in Stratford-on-Avon, where he lives with his wife Wendy (*née* Freeman), who was also at Leeds, 1971–1974. Their small terraced house, close to the centre of Stratford, is crammed with the accumulated paraphernalia of a life making art and collecting objects for inspiration. Wendy works around all of this and manages to find space for her ongoing paintings and make habitable the kitchen and adjoining room where we conducted the interview.

Simon arrived having been searching for more of his work, kept in another location in Stratford. He looks like a figure out of Dostoyevsky, or perhaps an Old Testament prophet. Tall and gaunt with long straggling hair and an even longer and bushy beard, his eyes shine with a mischievous intelligence. He is something of a character, a figure from central casting and indeed, earlier in the year, he had been working as an extra on *Les Miserables* and more recently the Gulag scenes in *Muppets Most Wanted*, neither of which required him to change his appearance at all.

I began by asking him why he had wanted to study Fine Art and was surprised to learn that he had originally wanted to be a scientist and study Ecology at Edinburgh University. He was denied this because his grades in Organic Chemistry were too low, so instead he did a foundation course at Guildford College of Art:

> At the end of a two-year course, I asked the tutors where to apply to and they said, "There is only one place in the country that will take you and that is Leeds."

i Richard Long was the best known British artist working in this way in the early 1970s. The American Robert Smithson made probably the most famous piece of all Land Art, "Spiral Jetty" (1970), for which Smithson arranged rock, earth and algae so as to form a long (1500 ft) spiral-shaped jetty protruding into Great Salt Lake in northern Utah, USA.

So I came up to Leeds for my interview and I do remember Jeff Nuttall looking at my work and saying, "Well you appear to be a manic depressive." I think he sort of recognised both the introspection and the grand gestures in my work.

One of the earliest grand gestures that Simon made was a joint project with another art student, Robert Hadfield. This involved a huge canvas: 2,500 square yards (2,000 square metres) of hand-painted advertising backdrops once used in the old variety theatres in Leeds. These he spread on the ground with a hovering weather balloon above, which released hundreds of paper darts. Simon explained how this work developed, beginning with finding his materials pulled out of the many derelict buildings left in Leeds as the city was being redeveloped:

In those days access to materials didn't mean new materials; there were all these old materials you could find. It was like digging up Pompeii: making new art out of old stuff. I went into an old sign writer's shop where the BBC studios were on Woodhouse Lane (now part of Leeds Metropolitan University) to get these theatre advertising backdrops. They were thirty foot by fifteen foot and covered in hand painted advertisements for watches or the local beauticians and so forth. . . .

Robert Hadfield, a fellow student, was doing a project that involved weather balloons. He had three of these weather balloons, which he made baskets for, filled . . . with paper darts and sent up with the balloons on a string with another string attached that opened a trapdoor and then down would come all these paper darts.

Well, imagine going out on the wasteland and doing all that — all the local kids came out because in those days kids played out in the streets, all those back-to-back houses, and if you did something like that all these children would come out to look. So he [Robert Hadfield] would send up this weather balloon, pull the string and down would come all these darts [Simon makes swirling motion around his head]. They all came out and all the kids chased the darts.

Because Robert had [supplied] the weather balloons, I went out and bought a brand new camera, a Super 8, brand new, out of its box, and I tied this underneath the weather balloon on a string with the camera running in order to film where all these the paper darts were going which was where I'd covered the wasteland with all these theatre backdrops. So it was like a huge collage, about fifty yards by fifty yards of solid canvas and what I wanted to do was to take an aerial photograph or an aerial film, so up went the camera. I did three ascents with the film running continuously for four minutes. So the camera went up with all the children on this vast coloured collage. . . .

A recurring theme in Simon English's Land Art has been aerial perspective, seeing things from above, not necessarily from an aircraft but more likely as an imagined

point of view. The concept is realised by the artist and the audience is left to join up the dots — literally in the case of his best-known work, the "All England Sculpture" project. Simon completed this huge geographical artwork over the summer holiday between his first and second year. The concept involved first taking a large a map of England and writing the word "England" in large capital letters from Northumberland in the north to Sussex in the south. The shape of the letters was then mapped out in dots, which became coordinate points on Ordnance Survey maps. Simon English then visited all of the points he had marked on the map and left a marker with information on his project. This artwork involved a lot of hitching around England and explaining what he was doing to a mystified audience, something that Simon regards as integral to his praxis: "[My] Art didn't mean anything unless you could explain it to an audience."

This attempt to reach out beyond an academic and elitist understanding of art was, as we have seen, very much a Leeds position. Simon's work on one level was highly conceptual, but this was qualified by a humanised and even moral position of making his work accessible to everyone. In this, his approach echoed the original *avant-garde* project of fusing life and art, an achievement for which he received very little recognition from the art establishment. A consequent project that he embarked upon, again during the summer holidays, this time at the end of his second year at Leeds, was incredibly ambitious: so vast was the undertaking that it was difficult to imagine it ever getting beyond the conceptual stage.

In 1971, Simon English set out to write the word "EARTH" on the planet, a letter on every continent: the "Whole Earth Sculpture". This seems to me to be a magnificent idea and one that even as it exists now, as a work-in-progress, deserves respect. Although Simon did complete two letters on the continent of America, the sheer scale of the work and, more importantly, the lack of funding eventually defeated him.

Meanwhile, back in 1970s Leeds, Simon had arranged for a copy of himself to sit in for him while he was travelling around the world. To construct the simulacrum, Simon had his head and beard shaved with each lock of hair numbered so that they could be attached to the head of a body cast of himself that he had made in the ceramic workshop. Once completed, painted and dressed up in Simon's clothes, the replica was remarkably lifelike and sat in the studio while his other self was away. It was there for his degree show and he left Leeds as he had always intended to, with first class honours. His subsequent career involved more Land Art but, as so often with Leeds students, recognition for the type of art he was making remained elusive. Along with Peter Parr, with whom he shared a house in Armley, Simon English continued to integrate what he had first explored at Leeds into his life.

One thing that emerged during my interview was that Simon had begun by thinking on a bigger scale than writing "EARTH" on the planet:

> I had to cut the original concept down to make it practical. It started out for me with imagining writing "Universe" on the universe using stars. That came from a piece I was working on where I was writing "View" using seventy-five mirrors all the way from here to the horizon which, as the sun came up, would catch the light and write "View" on the view, because I noticed where we lived in Herefordshire you could see the sun as it came around catch the window of a cottage and suddenly light it up!

This work uses the phenomenon of sunlight reflecting on glass or mirror that can be seen from miles away as bright points of light. The trick is to line all of the mirrors up exactly so that they all converge at the viewer's eye. As a student, Simon would explain how he achieved such feats as though this was the most obvious thing in the world, speaking in the manner of a slightly exasperated teacher explaining an obvious fact to a slow-witted pupil: "One has to imagine, as it were, a battery of mirrors aligned both to the sun *and* to the viewer. . . ." Simon had been educated at Stowe and still retained the most outrageously posh intonations in his speech. With his public school background, he was certainly in a minority at Leeds Polytechnic, but his good-natured individuality overcame any hostility and he actually fit into the Fine Art Department precisely because he was unusual, a one-off original, usually engaged in one of his ongoing projects.

During our interview, I was keen to see what work he had retained from his student days. There was apparently quite a lot, but the problem was finding it, as there was so much to search through in various locations. One thing that he had unearthed was an A3 sheet of closely typewritten paper, framed behind glass. On closer inspection, this was a complete list of everything he brought up to Leeds in 1970. The list was vast and comprehensive, thousands of items all meticulously catalogued. For me, this was an impressive work of text-based art produced at a time when progressive artists in Britain and the USA were exploring this form of Conceptualism. Fortunately, much of his output has been recorded in photographs or film which, as we have seen, was rarely the case. At the time it was understood that it was the *moment* of the event that was seen as pre-eminently important, and it was never imagined that the performance might be repeated at a later date. This now seems an unrealistic position, but at the time was rarely questioned.

There was also a degree of theoretical purity and provocative spontaneity that went against preserving a permanent record. Mark Baldwin (Fine Art student 1969–1972) recounts a performance he did for Yorkshire Television:

> Jeff [Nuttall] had been asked by one of the producers at Yorkshire TV to do a performance for one of their programmes to show the sort of work being produced at Leeds. Jeff asked me for ideas and I came up with this idea of wrapping Jeff up in long strands of elastic so he would look like [the] Michelin man. So to do this,

> I danced around him in circles while he sat on a stool. Jeff was playing his trumpet. He carried on doing this, making the music while I circled around wrapping him up more and more. But in the end they never showed it, wasn't suitable or something.

So what was considered a fairly regular piece of Performance Art inside the Fine Art Department was perhaps beyond the pale for regular television viewers. And it must be admitted that by the 1970s, the Fine Art Department had a reputation for silliness due to regular exhibitionist activities that got the attention of the national newspapers, such as this:

> Some time soon the worthy citizens of Leeds are going to find, lying in a public place, students made to look like corpses from the ruins of Pompeii after the eruption of Vesuvius. They will be seeing "fine artists in action" the work of . . . the fine art department at Leeds Polytechnic.[3]

And described in this article from *The Times Educational Supplement*:

> Passers–by in Leeds recently were amazed to see two polytechnic students, dressed in fur coats with bottles tied to them, carefully threading tomatoes on a string in slow motion. They would probably have been even more amazed if they had known that this street theatre was part of the work of the fine art department.[4]

Yet, as Glyn Banks wrote in an email to me on this subject,

> [I]t is also therefore important to correct the somewhat clichéd idea that this period produced only "performance and excess" but actually a whole range of activities, some of which were more concerned with a way to live your life rather than simply how to produce art.

This gets to the nub of the experience of being at Leeds. There seemed to be much more going on than producing artwork to be assessed as part of a degree course. What was also being explored was a way of negotiating life through art. This emerged from a situation of almost complete creative freedom that allowed the individual to go anywhere his or her inclination suggested. Such freedom forced students to examine what they were doing and why. All options were open, so why take one particular path? The one chosen would be that which defined you as an art student. The art was the student and the student was the art, since there was no once forcing you to behave in any other way. This wideness of scope brings with it an examination of life. For example, is it necessary to limit one's creative expression to the already defined parameters? Perhaps the real interest was in breaking through these paradigms and finding the essence of oneself as an individual, ideally, but not exclusively, as a creative being.

Of course, this could be quite daunting and also quite unreal. Nothing like this existed outside of the Fine Art Department, except perhaps in some utopian counter–cultural communities where alternative ways of living were being played out.[ii] The explorations of the limits of individual freedom, so enthusiastically embarked on in the early 1960s, were by the *fin de sixties* encountering consequences. One person's freedom could be another's oppression. Was complete freedom attainable in any sense? Was the outcome more likely to be uncontrolled, unpredictable and even destructive? For outside observers, this seemed to be the case with some Leeds Fine Art students. Such an outcome was, however, almost programmed to happen, given the philosophy inherent in the department. But for every excess encouraged by the need for creativity and making an impression, there were genuine attempts to fashion a coherent picture out of the chaos. The most successful students were those who could work with the prevailing ethos without being overpowered by it.

David Whatley

David Whatley turned down a place at St Martin's in London to study at Leeds having seen Robin Page's "Professor Protozoa's Roadshow" and later the inviting space of the new Polytechnic building. After a gap year in America, he arrived at Leeds in 1970 with his wife, the painter Rebecca Douglas. In appearance, David Whatley looked like an archetypal sculptor, saturnine and stocky with a shock of dark, closely curled hair, a person used to the physicality of shaping unyielding materials. His chosen materials came from scouring the streets of Leeds, where he collected industrial amounts of junk which he then incorporated or used to construct a complete environment, a sculpture that a person could inhabit. The scale of this was such that it rose up over several floors, reached by ladders and ropes where smaller compartments perched like tree houses supported on scaffolding poles. His work was in part inspired by his experience of arriving in Leeds, as he described:

> I found the northern "grittiness" of Leeds the town an exciting place to be. I have always been interested in archaeology, and I found parts of the city to be wonderful bits of industrial archaeology in the process, sadly, of being demolished. "Leeds, Motorway City of the '70s" was the proud heading on all envelopes sent out by the municipality. The reality was that the old working class communities were having great swathes cut through them by the new road network. Very solid,

ii The Situationist International proposed alternatives to capitalism, many of which were taken up during the 1960s, most notably in a rejection of the mass media, materialism and any forms of repression. Fluxus also proposed an alternative to the prevailing order. The communes that emerged during the 1960s were often utopian experiments in the collective ownership of property based on sexual freedom without the repressive institution of the family. However, these ultimately led to various forms of disillusionment in the face of practical realities.

well–built houses and terraces were being torn down. I had developed a method of working before I came to Leeds of using *objets trouvés*, also scrap materials and items which had connotations of age and association or which bore a patina of use and wear. As I explored the city by bike and on foot, I realised I was in a treasure house. I did what I could to salvage items I could transport away back to the Fine Art studio, and use them in assemblage form. . . .

Finding the artificial–limb fitting centre and getting permission to use the old discarded limbs took me on another path into the dark and macabre. Eventually, after having made a written request to use redundant limbs in my artwork, I received a letter giving me permission to take away from the store those items that I needed, with the proviso that the limbs were not to be used in a disrespectful way. The "store" turned out to be several old air–raid shelters with leaky roofs. They were filled floor to ceiling with arms and legs; mostly these were made of beautifully shaped aluminium with leather fittings, straps and springs with cleverly articulated joints. They were hollow, and painted pink. The rain had filled up the hollow limbs with stagnant water, the leather was often smelly and slimy, and I had the strong impression that the store would not have been out of place in Auschwitz.

The appeal of the old and strange over the new and clean has always been recognised by artists; the sublime needs ruins, not renovations. The Fine Art studio was a testimony to this perception as the detritus of discarded consumer durables and other more exotic items such as artificial limbs and stuffed animals were brought in for interest or incorporation. David Whatley took this tendency a stage further in making a whole constructed environment incorporating found objects and materials. This development was made possible in part by the space of the Main Studio and also the application of welding techniques. David had been taught how to weld by Charlie Murray, a skilled technician whose expertise was sadly underused, as was often the case. David Whatley was unusual in actually acquiring practical skill whilst studying Fine Art. The opportunity was there, but with no compulsion or guidance, some of the top–end equipment and facilities were under–utilised. This was an unforeseen consequence of a completely free and unstructured approach. When nothing is compulsory and everything is available, there may be a perverse appeal in turning down such beneficence. Many students were perhaps unaware of or uninterested in the technology available, preferring instead like David Whatley to work with the detritus of progress or push an anarchic spanner into the system. John Fox offered another alternative, as David told me:

I think it might have been in my second year at Leeds that I became involved with John Fox and the Welfare State. He had some students from Bradford College of Art (Steve Gumbley and Jamie Proud) working with him doing experimental street theatre. Foxy was based in a rather large, grand house at Spencer Place,

which had at one time seen better days and had been used as a doctor's surgery. I remember rescuing some medical textbooks that were being cleared out of the damp, rotting cellar. John and his entourage would enter the studio when they were visiting Leeds in between gigs, and create a little ripple of interest as they ascended the staircase to the mezzanine floor of offices. . . .

I found myself attracted to the activities of the "State", and was invited to work with them. There was more than a touch of a guerrilla band about them: travelling in ex–military vehicles, living in caravans and mounting *blitz-krieg* cultural attacks on unsuspecting communities. John was old enough to have served his time doing National Service. At one time, there was a fashion for calf–high leather boots with lots of hooks and lacing; it seemed that anyone who wanted to be taken seriously in the Welfare State got hold of a pair of these boots.

Footwear was important at the time, with boots of various kinds being *de rigueur*. It was as though a directive had been sent out that ankles were to be covered at all times. Shoes were occasionally glimpsed, but this was most often for ironic display. The same was true of hair, which was universally long and unkempt — so much so that a neat haircut was an exceptional sighting on campus. Looking at the mug shots of 1969 and 1970 Fine Art students, they almost all have long hair. Standing out as an art student had become more difficult since what had once been the identifying marks of the bohemian rebel had now become universal.

From the Polytechnic to the University, Woodhouse Lane was a procession of identikit students with their long hair, army great coats and flared jeans, all trying to look as though they were living a debauched rock–and–roll lifestyle. And indeed rock and roll was deeply influential, and more and more vinyl albums with their increasingly portentous covers and content were being released to a ready audience, who were lapping it up. I was never that convinced. The force seemed to have been diluted and was mutating towards an earnest attempt to make rock and roll more "progressive". It was all very tedious and, I thought, heading in the wrong direction. Nobody was dancing anymore.

There was a parallel tendency in art that emerged at the same time, a preference for the obscure and difficult over the enjoyable and immediate. A pertinent example of this might be seen in Art and Language, one of the most "progressive" of the art movements that emerged during the late 1960s and the one that has since become the most celebrated.[5] Art and Language originally emerged from the writings on conceptual art by the tutors at Coventry School of Art, which became part of Lanchester Polytechnic in 1970 at the same time as Leeds College of Art's polytechnic merger. There are interesting parallels and comparisons to be made. We touched on these in previous chapters without exactly defining what Art and Language stood for. Here is a contemporary review by William Feaver of a 1972 exhibition of the group's work:

> The outline scheme of Art–Language is a sort of conceptual art potholing, a prolonged wriggling into ideas of the theory, the nature and the purpose of art, through tortuous semantic and philosophic channels. . . . [T]he interested observer, in my experience, retires baffled, agreeing on the whole that this high thinking, this probing analysis must in principal be a Good Thing if only by virtue of its suggestion in art school circles and beyond that thought is a useful, probably vital prerequisite to artistic concerns.[6]

The annoying word "challenging" had not yet come into circulation to describe any work of art, but it was certainly an appellation waiting to happen by 1970. Here is a more contemporary view looking back from 1999:

> It is a perilous journey returning to the dense prose and contorted intellectualism of the now distant and strange world of the first six issues of the journal Art–Language (May 1969–Summer 1972). Like documents of a lost civilisation, they demand and resist interpretation, appeal and repulse in equal measure. . . . Intellectual difficulty, severity of expression, obsessive formalization, disjunctiveness and incompleteness are all important aspects of the writing practice of the Art and Language group, along with a certain self deprecating humour.[7]

This last observation is welcome and I do find that there is something quite appealing about the whole concept of setting out to be deliberately difficult, knowing that this will get top marks in the art world. In the history of Modernism, it has worked every time. *Art-Language* was the ultimate expression of the intellectualising of art, of art as a theory to be written about, of art only existing as theory. Art and Language deliberately and knowingly made the text the work of art.

This modification reminded me of Tom Wolfe's epiphany when reading the Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times* in 1974, when he "was *jerked alert*" by the following:

> Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather lack a persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial — the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify.[8]

As Wolfe noted, "In short: frankly, without a theory to go with it, I can't see a painting."[9] Art and Language went quite a way beyond this, making the theory the work of art and losing the painting altogether, "attempting the complete elimination of the aesthetic from the artistic field".[10] While there is something audaciously original in this, it isn't much fun. Any pleasure comes from rumbling the plot rather than cross–referencing the contents of a grey filing cabinet or actually reading *Art-Language* journals one to six. Perhaps the most pleasure I derive from it is the comparison of Coventry with Leeds as centres for late–modernist art production.

Here, for example, is what David Whatley was doing at Leeds at the same time as the students at Coventry were attempting to verbalise their creative ideas in line with the demands of the Art and Language tutors there:

> I got to hear that the Polytechnic had acquired use of the Central Garages building. I went along to investigate, and found a sort of paradise for me to work in. I think I was attracted by the authenticity of the site. It was not a college environment. It was right on a busy street, and had the air of shabbiness and semi-dereliction that I am still attracted to. The interior space was huge, and the first floor was reached by a steep ramp, at the top of which was a turntable to enable cars to negotiate a very tight turn; if you came up the ramp at speed and stopped suddenly on the ramp you could get it to revolve. In the basement of the building, I found the boiler house, and tons of coke for the central heating furnace.
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> I took over one small office space on the upper floor, and proceeded to create a cramped, warm, smelly environment. In my scavenging of the partially demolished parts of the city, I had got hold of an old "tortoise" stove. This I installed, and must have rigged up some sort of flue pipe to the outside. I had found a huge block of liquorice, probably from an abandoned chemist halfway up Beeston Hill. I established a routine of lighting the stove, and setting a pot on in which to boil up liquorice liquor. Gradually I furnished the space with old chairs, connected up the mains supply to an electric light and subdivided the space with partitions and very narrow doors, which I constructed on site.
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> I suppose I was eventually working to the deadline of the end of the course, as I wanted there to be a grand opening of my installation. There were a few small sculptures, which I had made by modifying electrical appliances, for instance a roaring dog made from a vacuum cleaner. Dave Holland, a very hairy musician with the Welfare State, agreed to be a disturbing preacher. He read passages from the bible while eating beetroot sandwiches. He was to stand playing an electric piano in the dark space of the upper floor, illuminated by a spotlight. My wife, Rebecca, was dressed in a white lab-coat. A large coke brazier was to greet the guests with radiant warmth as they stepped into the large dark building from the street.
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> During the afternoon prior to the opening, as one of the many tasks to be accomplished before opening time, I lit the big iron brazier filled with coke from the boiler room. I then went back upstairs to attend to other things in the installation, lighting the stove and setting up mood lighting. I suddenly became aware of flashing blue lights and loud voices calling. Seeing clouds of smoke emanating from all the openings of a large building, someone had, not unreasonably, called the fire brigade! Somehow, I managed to reassure the fire officer that the building was not on fire, and that everything was under control![11]

This rich account of student work, in which David Whatley created an environment that was as much part of him and his life as an artwork to be assessed by tutors, seems to have a good degree of authenticity. There is little posturing or "challenging". The art is person–to–person, intended to "greet the guests with radiant warmth". It seems to me something is happening here that goes beyond mere intellectualising. And yet high Conceptual Art was the currency of the day, as most retrospective accounts of the time seem to show. It is my contention that this is only half the story.

Much of the activity at Leeds seemed to be in opposition to the more severe and uninviting expressions of late Modernism. In some cases, this was the concept of art as disappearing into theory and in other cases, it was something more concrete but equally uninviting. People living in the new modernist inspired buildings found themselves isolated and the structures were often vandalised or poorly maintained.[12] Meanwhile, vast areas of terraced houses built during the Victorian era were being flattened, destroying both communities and an industrial heritage.[13] Modernisation and Modernism were not producing any futuristic utopia and, in comparison, the past, as plundered by David Whatley and others, seemed rich in ornament and interest. These trappings were incorporated into much of the work produced by the Fine Art students, work that seemed to stand as a ramshackle, eclectic snub to the streamlined future envisaged when the Polytechnic was first opened. The appearance of sheep grazing on the grass mound in front of the Polytechnic was perhaps the most compelling evidence of a separation of ways, a different vision for the future.

Gavin Lockhart

The sheep were the work of Gavin Lockhart who, perhaps more than anyone, pushed the Leeds experiment to its limits. For this he paid the consequences and was expelled, along with two accomplices, Steven Philips and Tim Darby. This in itself was quite an achievement, as he had done nothing of an anti–social nature and his expulsion was based on his work falling outside the widest definition of Fine Art, which at Leeds was very wide indeed. He wrote to me in response to my questionnaire:

> Was there anywhere else I could have been supported in the idea of introducing two live sheep into the department and given a space in the building for them to live and freely graze around the Polytechnic and surrounding urban grasslands? The staff had to concede they couldn't find the mechanism to actually pay for the sheep but could fund the upkeep and support. They also supported me in the concept of anonymity and kept the press and police off for a remarkably long time.

Gavin Lockhart had come to Leeds precisely because it was the one art college in the UK that seemed to offer him the possibility of complete freedom to explore his ideas. He had spent three years at Glasgow School of Art but found it too dogmatic.

His interest in the work of his mentors, Duchamp and Cage, could not be pursued within such a restrictive framework. He arrived in Leeds looking like an archetypal hippie, with long hair, round wire glasses, sandals and threadbare clothing underlining his alternative credentials. Here he began to look for alternatives:

> It was a very big deal for me to go to Leeds. I quit Glasgow School of Art at the beginning of fourth year and spent the year hitching round English art schools and chose Leeds for their open agenda. [This meant having] to uproot Kay and our two year old Marcelle and leave our great flat and friends and move to a back–to–back in Armley. [F]irst day at Leeds and I am given a load of tubes of acrylic paint. [I am] Really upset at this direction and empty them along the lockers outside the studio. Very nearly expelled and end up in front of Director of Poly. It seems the art school and Polytechnic marriage was one of inconvenience and neither side was at ease with each other.

This was very much the case for Patrick Nuttgens, the Director of the Polytechnic, having to deal with students and staff in the Fine Art Department regularly transgressing "normal" codes of behaviour. For the Fine Art body this was a challenge too good to resist and much effort went into the traditional sport of *épater le bourgeois.* This was accompanied by righteous howls of protest at the draconian restrictions free spirits had to endure under the Polytechnic regime. Nuttgens was often in despair as his broadly sympathetic attitude towards the arts was pushed to breaking point. He would therefore have been surprised that Gavin Lockhart, the student he came close to expelling on his first day, was the one who made the most use of the Polytechnic's wider resources. This emerged in Gavin's response to three of the questions I put to him:

> **James Charnley:** What do you think made Leeds a good place to be?
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> **Gavin Lockhart:** I chose to go to Leeds partly because it was part of the Polytechnic and I could plunder around in all the different departments. I learned to touch type in the Secretarial Department and spent lots of time in the Science, Engineering and Food and Technology departments. The lecture theatre guests were exciting in their diversity and being encouraged to participate in the program was empowering, like enabling Robert Ollendorf to speak on his work with Wilhelm Reich and orgone energy . . .
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> **JC:** What do you think made it a bad place to be?
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> **GL:** Relocating the art school in the Polytechnic didn't seem to change its internal politics. It took more tenacity to take the lift to the third or fourth floor of the art block and try collaborating with the Graphics or Media departments than space invade the Science or Engineering departments. It was easier for me to borrow

a whole laboratory — the high voltage research lab — for my degree show than to access the only video camera in the building from the Media Department, ultimately "borrowed" for two weeks to film in a mental hospital.

JC: Were there any defining or outstanding events for you?

GL: The delight in taking our orgone energy shooter to the Science Department to be analysed with a Geiger counter and the erratic results confronting and confusing the scientists, a nice meeting of arts and science. But then we build the fully operational orgone accumulator and get expelled for being a bad influence on the other students? The solidarity shown by the third year students in protesting about this by taking down their degree show confirmed Leeds to be simply a collection of people without a collective ideology but with some kind of commitment to spending three years there. Their action allowed us — me, Steve and Tim — back into the fold.

Gavin Lockhart's orgone accumulator was a memorable piece of sculpture, not least because it posed the question as to whether it was a sculpture or not. Was a device intended to concentrate orgone energy a machine rather than an art object? Perhaps this was an example of useful or applied art? The accumulator did have a function, after all. If the formal art content was subsumed, then was this fulfilling the *avant-garde*'s project of merging art and life? And what was orgone energy? Did it actually exist or was it merely a concept, a useful symbol to be incorporated into the aura of the artwork? These questions made the whole concept very intriguing, although any interest at the time would not have been centred on these questions.

In fact, there was very little interrogation or scepticism about what Gavin was doing. I, for one, was fairly confident that orgone energy was a fact and in this I was not alone. If William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer *et al* thought that Wilhelm Reich, the discoverer of orgone energy, was right, then that was good enough for me. The fact that Reich had been persecuted and imprisoned by the authorities and eventually died for his unorthodox beliefs was another plus. I read his book *The Function of the Orgasm*[14] and became convinced that he was onto something after trying out his theories in practice: tension, relaxation, tension, relaxation, building up to the ultimate relaxation/release of orgasm. All of this was not, ultimately, about self–gratification but about lovemaking, according to Reich. It was all sound advice, but hardly science.

In those days, however, there was much less scepticism about quasi–scientific notions. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical methods and map of the mental world was then pretty well unassailable; accepted as all but proven, as were the mystical concepts of Carl Jung, another counter–cultural guru. Reich, also a pupil of Freud, took his ideas a stage further, not merely identifying sexual repression as a cause of neuroses but presenting sex as a hugely liberating force. Moreover, he identified the root causes of fascism and cancer: body armour, the unnatural damning up of internal energies that damage both

body and mind. Tension must be met with relaxation, and the ultimate expression of this was the orgasm.[iii] It all made perfect sense and coincidently chimed in with the libidinous tendencies of the times. Gavin's interest, though, was more focussed on the practical aspects of harnessing the orgone energy that Reich claimed to have identified.

Gavin explained to me that what he was constructing in the studio was an orgone accumulator based on Reich's original plans. The layers of organic and inorganic material acted as a focus for orgone energy, the natural energy of the universe that existed as bions. Sitting inside the box was meant to be enormously beneficial, not only as cure for cancer but for one's mental and physical well–being. I sat in the box for a while and could not honestly say I felt any different, but then maybe I didn't sit in there long enough. I was prepared to suspend my judgement, the most common fall–back position in the early 1970s when a lack of scepticism regarding all things occult and spiritual was fashionable.[15]

The counter–cultural position was to give more credence to fringe beliefs than mainstream ideas that were obviously part of the global capitalist conspiracy, enforced by the law, the military and the government. Against this were the visionaries, the poets and the revolutionaries who used sex and drugs to break on through to the other side, as the song went. In fact, just about anyone who had an alternative voice was okay. Reich was not only alternative, he had good scientific credentials — apparently. He understood the benefits of sexual liberation and for this he had been hounded by the fascists and condemned by "straight" society. There was no reason to doubt him unless, of course, you were supporting the other side. So while the scientific community, quite rightly in retrospect, was highly sceptical of his work, he was taken seriously by many artists and intellectuals on the left.[iv]

iii A concise account of Reich's ideas can be found in his introduction to *The Function of the Orgasm* on p. 9: "Sexuality and anxiety are functions of the living organism operating in opposite directions: pleasurable expansion and anxious contraction. The orgasm formula which directs sex–economic research is as follows: MECHANICAL TENSION>BIOELECTRICAL CHARGE>BIOELECTRICAL DISCHARGE. It led to the experimental investigation of the organization of living from non–living matter, to experimental bion research, and more recently to the discovery of orgone radiation. Research in the field of sexuality and bions opened a new approach to the problem of cancer and a number of other disturbances in the vegetative life. The immediate cause of many devastating diseases can be traced to the fact that man is the sole species who does not fulfil the natural law of sexuality. The death of millions of people in war is the result of the overt social negation of life. This negation, in turn, is the expression and consequence of psychic and somatic disturbances of the life function."

iv Norman Mailer and A.S. Neil built many different orgone accumulators: "J.D. Salinger, Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs — who claimed to have had a spontaneous orgasm in his. At the height of his James Bond fame, Sean Connery swore by the device, and Woody Allen parodied it in the movie *Sleeper*, giving it the immortal nickname 'Orgasmatron'." (Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron,* London: Fourth Estate, p. 6.)

One thing that impressed me about Gavin's approach was the way it made aesthetics irrelevant. Somehow he seemed to have solved a major problem regarding quality and how a work of art was to be evaluated. Rather than leave this to the capricious notions of beauty, significance and meaning beloved by art critics, he had reduced the whole debate to "Does it work or not?" I liked the idea that art could be regarded in the same way as a machine. Art need not be an intellectual, self–referential pursuit or obsessively concerned with self–expression. It was quite refreshing to be able to step outside this field as Gavin had done and build a functioning object.

I was to be very influenced by Gavin's approach, and, along with other influences, absorbed it into my own student work. In this I was not alone. One way or another, every student at Leeds was influenced by what was going on around them.

The open plan studio had that effect. The three students I have written about seemed to me to stand out, but my view is subjective and highly selective. There were other good pieces of work being produced as well as mediocre or bad ones. There were students who struggled to come up with anything at all. Others just worked away quietly on their own projects. However, to mention everybody is unfeasible and such an egalitarian approach would take away the creative tension that helped produce the best work. I will just give a nod in passing to everybody not mentioned and hope that my omissions are not seen as anything other than a practicality. The same approach will also have to apply to the tutors, whose work and influence I will be looking at next.